

Telephone interview with former ENS Craig Compiano, supply officer aboard USS *Kirk* (DE-1087) during Operation Frequent Wind, April-May 1975. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 23 January 2009.

I want to ask you about some of your recollections from Operation Frequent Wind and your service on the *Kirk*. When did you arrive aboard the ship?

September of '74.

What was your job?

Assistant supply officer and disbursing officer.

What was your rank at the time?

I was an ensign, green out of school. I had graduated from USC and then went to supply school for 8 months in Athens, GA. I left there and went to the *Kirk*.

It was getting on toward the latter part of April 1975, *Kirk* was in Singapore when the message came in that Saigon was about to fall and the ship was to proceed to the coast of Vietnam. What do you remember about that time?

There was a mad scramble to get everybody back on board but I don't recall the details.

About the 27th and 28th of April, were you ever in a position to witness these helicopters coming out from Saigon and other places?

We were on one of the landing paths so the helicopters coming out were looking for someplace to land. The first one came out and circled the ship. We had been alerted that there was a threat of takeover by escaping Vietnamese. There was some confusion about who were the good guys at that point. Were they refugees or were they people trying to commandeer ships. So there was a great deal of concern about security. When that first helicopter arrived and came in for his first pass and was attempting to land anywhere, including the top of the ASROC launcher, we were trying to wave him off. Our own helicopter was hard down in the hangar. By rights we shouldn't have taken on any helicopters in addition to that one. But they guided that first helicopter in and we offloaded the passengers, some of whom had either live grenades or firearms. We all thought that a helicopter landing on our ship was pretty exciting.

Then the second one started coming in because they saw there was a landing going on. By this time we started getting news that many helicopters were coming out and they were landing all over the place. We picked up our second one. At that point we ditched the first helicopter. We pushed it over the side and brought in the second one. That started a stream of helicopters coming in, most of which got pushed over the side.

Remember these were relatively untrained pilots trying to land on a moving ship. There was a lot of concern because these guys were flying out there supposedly untrained and would crash and there would be huge fires and explosions. So we vacated the back end of the ship as much as possible and had the crew move forward away from the fantail as these guys were trying to land.

When there was a lull in the activity, they hand-walked a couple of the helicopters and put them port and starboard to the hangar. Then they flew an Air America helicopter to the fantail.

You mean they launched and then re-landed it?

Yes. They launched and re-landed the Air America helicopter on the fantail. That wasn't done in the first five. I don't remember the exact sequence. I believe there's a nice picture of the helo control station where they had stenciled all the helicopter silhouettes. I think it was something like 14 of the Huey's and one of the big CH-47.

That was the Chinook that attempted to land.

That's almost its own separate story. After the passengers disembarked, the crew tried to rip as much of the avionics out of the helicopters as possible before pushing them over the side. The weapons were collected and moved up to the second deck by the stacks. This was an ongoing process that went on all day. When the Chinook came in all hands were told to move forward. Nobody believed the pilot could land. From where we were, you could see him back there waffling around. We had been told that the helicopter had a lot of people aboard. For those of us not allowed to be back that far, we had to watch from afar as this guy was bobbing and weaving above the flight deck area. Then he flew off to the side of the ship, set the Chinook on its side, and jumped out the window. The blades exploded and the helo sank like a rock.

After this drama of seeing him bobbing and weaving back there, the next word that went out after this episode was, man overboard, man the lifeboats, and go rescue this guy. And our first reaction was, "Why go save this guy? He just dumped his helicopter into the water with all those people aboard." What we didn't see and didn't know was that while he was bobbing and weaving back there our guys were running out underneath catching people who were jumping out of the helicopter.

This is a whole new perspective. I've heard this story from several people but you're the first one to say that there was a general impression that there were still people aboard when he ditched it. The general belief was that there were many people still aboard but there were no more than 10.

That was the suspicion by those who had been asked to go further forward. The XO was amidships at that point and there was a murmuring of discontent. "Do you really want us to go out and rescue that guy? Come on, get outta here."

In other words, the pilot just sacrificed a whole bunch of people. Why should we save him?

There was a little bit of that. There was a little back-channel murmuring. If you were amidships, you couldn't see the people being dropped off or guys running out and catching people. You couldn't see any of that. All you could see was this very large helicopter bobbing and weaving and trying to land and the next thing we saw was him flying off and ditching. So there was a big disconnect there. Anyway, the guys were following orders. They got the boat, went out and rescued the guy and then the rest of the story got filled in.

And suddenly the guy's a real hero.

Yes. He's a hero. And more importantly, the heroes were our guys who were running out underneath this helicopter and catching people. He was 10 feet off the deck and the ramp was opened and people were jumping and dropping. Our guys were running out there taking the

risk that they could smacked by this big machine. And it was the classic thing. The boiler technicians or the seamen who were generally seen as goofing off or whatever. Those were the guys who turned into heroes when it came time. And they were the ones who were saving people.

What about the Air America helo?

That was the prize to be saved. At that point we had saved two others. The reason they had to fly it off and then re-land it on the fantail was because we already had all berths taken. We had walked two helicopters up to the sides of the hangar and already had their tails pointed out to sea. I think the Air America was landed towards the end.

It's been over 30 years since all this went on. Hugh Doyle was able to send me copies of the ship's log from that period. It mentions that the first helicopter was dumped to make room for the second one. That agrees with what you have already said. But if you talk to some of the other crew members, they say that the very first one to land was saved. But that's most likely not the case.

The reason I think the first helicopter was dumped was because the time interval was so short. After the first one landed, it was like homing pigeons. Everybody else saw that there was a safe haven. It took a lot less time to push the first one over the side.

Captain Jacobs and Hugh Doyle told me that when the first helicopters started coming out they overflowed the *Kirk* looking for larger decks to land on. Their feeling was, “Can’t they see we have clear flight deck? Why don’t they land on us? We want to be part of the action here.” I guess that goes back to the classic, be careful what you wish for.

They put a guy named Swan [Paul] down in CIC because he spoke some Vietnamese. They put him on the radio and he was saying, “Ship 1087. Clear deck. Land here.” They wanted to bring back a trophy.

Yes. Everyone got into the enthusiasm.

But your recollection clarifies what was going on and agrees with the log. The first one went over the side to make room for the second. And the so-called trophies you brought back landed later.

Much later. You can imagine trying to walk a helicopter on its skids. You had to take the tail and walk the helo up to the side of the ship. There was a whole bunch of guys that would move a helicopter. They walked it to the edge of the deck and then got on the back end of the tail and just started pushing on it until it tipped itself over the side. And that was a very dangerous process because of the metal skids. You were pushing the weight of the helicopter farther and farther out over the edge of the deck. And at some point the helicopter's weight tipped it into the sea. But the skids would sometimes collapse so that the helicopter, instead of going nose first, would collapse on one skid and then the helo would start moving in an arc with the tail swinging from straight up to 3 o'clock as it fell sideways over the side. So all this was not a risk-free proposition. It sounds glamorous and heroic to say we pushed helicopters over. There were certainly a couple that tested the mettle of the folks out there pushing. But you did it because another one was coming in.

I understand that some of these initial refugees who arrived aboard the ship brought their wealth with them. It was gold in the form of what looked like wrapped Spearmint chewing gum.

They brought money, which was probably worthless but it was all counted and receipted. And then they brought little chewing-gum like sticks of gold.

And your job was to take the gold and give them receipts for it.

Right. All of their valuables were receipted and then put in the disbursing safe.

And then they would reclaim it when you arrived in Subic.

Yes.

The whole idea was to keep people from getting violent and trying to steal from each other.

It was pure safekeeping. I'm sure rationally, it's as you state. We had taken them in, had them aboard the ship. Weapons were confiscated. I don't recall if there were other valuables that were confiscated or put into safekeeping other than the money and the gold. I don't actually recall what precipitated the idea that we would confiscate it. What you explained a moment ago seems rational but I don't recall the thinking that started the process. Certainly if the currency and gold were put away with a receipt, there could also be no argument about how much they came on board with when they left. There wouldn't be later accusations that they left the ship with less than they started with. Some of them had hidden valuables, including gold in the folds of their garments.

This first group of refugees were fairly well off from the upper crust. They were families of some of the pilots. From your observation, how did they look?

They appeared to be in pretty good shape.

And from your point of view, they appeared to be harmless refugees, not Viet Cong agents or NVA posing as refugees.

We didn't know that.

So there was always a fear that some of these people may have been plants?

Sure. We always had armed guards surrounding them. For the most part, I think our crew saw them as good people. There were family units, children, and all of that. That was all positive. But I don't think that the guard was ever relaxed completely. There was always someone there watching. There was curtailed access to the ship. It was a safe harbor but at the same time . . . At that point there was no way to know who was who. And there was suspicion and warnings given that there was some suspected commandeering going on somewhere in that fleet. Somewhere out there activities had gone on that had led us to be concerned about having some sort of commandeering event happen.

I understand that you were the unofficial photographer on this operation because you had your own camera and you were snapping pictures of a lot of this.

I was the cruise book editor. DK1 Edwards, the disbursing clerk who worked for me also took a lot of pictures. He took the portraits of everyone and probably some of the other pictures in the book. I don't know why more of his pictures aren't in there. Yes, I had a camera that took pretty good pictures and I just took lots. I was able to do this because I wasn't a line officer. I didn't have watch. When we brought the flotilla out, some of the line officers went off to those other ships to stand watch and drive ships. But I didn't have that responsibility so I took pictures.

There was a second phase to this whole operation. About the third day, the *Kirk* received a message from the *Blue Ridge* that they were sending a civilian aboard. That, of course, was Richard Armitage. Were you privy to any of that at the time?

No. I just knew that we picked somebody up.

After the *Kirk* picked him up, you cruised all night down to Con Son Island. In the morning, while it was still dark, the ship arrived there. Do you recall seeing the Vietnamese fleet moored there?

I don't recall seeing the ships. I do recall when we started escorting the ships.

What do you recall about the *Kirk* playing the role of shepherd to the Vietnamese navy?

That was a ragtag group. There were some very unfortunate people living in squalid conditions. The vessels themselves were in deplorable shape. The crowded conditions, habitability, and sanitation were challenged. There were just huge masses of people.

The estimates I've heard were anywhere from 25,000 to 30,000 people on those ships.

They were crowded. The people who came out on the helicopters were generally affiliated with the military or had some kind of high-ranking political connection that got them a place on those helicopters. They were wealthier. If nothing else, it was a clean, new helicopter. They got 10 people on board and an hour later they were off. The ships, on the other hand, were abandoned and derelict vessels and they just put on as many people as could beg, borrow, or bribe their way on board. Those people they just packed in because the vessel could hold the weight of so many people. You had a physical constraint on a helicopter. You had no physical constraint on ships so you could just pack them in. You had a choice. You could be an ant on a Hershey bar or you could be left behind and die.

I have a mental picture of that mass of bodies squeezed on board one of the ships. And it had to come pretty close to see the people. I don't recall which vessel it was but we came close enough that we could observe. I never went out in the motor whale boat so my vantage point would have been from the deck of the *Kirk*.

Having gone through *Kirk's* logs from that period, I just could not get over how busy you all were going back and forth and trying to herd these ships together. It was taking food and water out to them. Chief Burwinkel was going back and forth either in the captain's gig or the motor whaleboat and holding sick call. It was a super human effort on everyone's part. I know you did have some help. The *Cook* was out there with you.

There were two ships and I don't recall how early in the episode *Cook* joined us. I think it was pretty early. I heard later from Captain Jacobs that they formed up all the South Vietnamese vessels in two lines. The captain of each ship was told to "follow the guy ahead of you." Then they put the *Cook* and the *Kirk* at the lead of each of these two columns. These were not ocean-going sailors previously so we had to take a coastal fleet and turn it into a trans-oceanic fleet. And that's how we steamed across the ocean.

As *Kirk* got closer to Subic Bay a serious problem developed. In fact, it became a diplomatic issue. Marcos, not wanting to offend the North Vietnamese government, decided that he wouldn't accept these ships or the refugees. And there were a lot of behind the scenes negotiations to resolve the issue. CAPT Jacobs told me that he took this motley fleet and made a huge circle to kill time while this was happening. And sometime the following morning an arrangement was agreed upon where the ships could come into Subic but had to come in reflagged as U.S. Navy ships. Do you remember any of this?

Every ship had a member of our crew who took command and they hoisted the U.S. flag and we continued our journey into Subic. I remember coming into Subic with this trail of vessels behind us.

There was also a huge offloading of the weapons cache. As we got closer to the P.I. they sent a large motor barge alongside and we offloaded a huge cache of weapons.

So the small arms weren't dumped over the side. They were actually offloaded onto this vessel.

That's correct. I think most of these weapons were what we had confiscated during the helicopter rescues. I don't know what weapons were confiscated from the other vessels.

It's been about 33 years since all this happened. Do you ever think about that time?

It comes back every once in awhile. When I talk to someone and recollect those events, it will bring back strong memories of Vietnam. Occasionally, I take out the cruise book and say, "That's really neat. It really happened." I remember CAPT Jacobs saying, "This has been a great chapter in our lives and the story of the ship. We will all remember this for a long time to come." He had very quickly observed how momentous this episode was for all of us and for the number of lives we saved. And he's right. It lives on as a strong memory.